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ABSTRACT

The media's use of videotaped 1992 New Year's greetings to President George Bush (taped by several people in front of a life size image of the president from his college days) raises questions of the media's diversity, ethics, and agenda setting. A New Haven television station reported on the activity as one of many taking place that night. Ten days later, portions of the tape had been shown on many television network news feeds, written up in newspapers nationwide, and served as a vehicle to bring a national news program to interview some of the participants. It is ironic that as much as the media attempt to go to the wider public, they have to rely on those stories that are easiest to get. All media outlets went to the same source for the videotape of the event. Ethical issues involved payment for the videotape, requested embargoes on the story, and the use of private media for public consumption. Media hype fulfilled its own needs, feeding on itself and almost going around in circles. This case indicates, on the one hand, that the media continue to provide little diversity, they continue to be dominated by the national print media, and they do not always act ethically. On the other hand, the case indicates that the media are seeking diversity, they are attempting to be processors and put the news into a context, and they are attempting to act ethically. As the media environment continues to change, there is a critical need to research the relationships among the media. Continuous study is needed to add to an understanding of how the media set their agenda. (RS)

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Gaining Media Attention in the Changing Media Environment:

A Case Study by

Margot Hardenbergh, Ph.D.

Presented at the

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Gaining Media Attention in the Changing Media Environment:

A Case Study by

Margot Hardenbergh, Ph.D.

Asking the public to send their New Year's Greetings on video tape to the President by speaking to a life size image of President Bush in his college days would be called a gimmick from any vantage point. Why then did the media, local and national, pick up such a story? This paper will describe the event and analyze the media's use of it by discussing questions of diversity, ethics, and agenda setting.

The relationship between public concern and media coverage is defined as a process,[1] and this study will attempt to further the understanding of the process. As new technologies develop, as the media environment changes, and as news practices change, is the public being better served? Are the new media changing the way they set their own agenda? Are the changes meaning that journalists are shifting from information transporters to information processors?[2] The underlying question is how the media react to others' agendas, including their own?

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[1]Shanto Iyengar, "New Directions of Agenda-Setting Research,"Communication Yearbook 11, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988, p.596.

[2]Karen Jurgensen and Philip Meyer, "After Journalism," Journalism Quarterly, vol.69,No.2, Summer 1992, pp.266-272.

As Webster and Ogles pointed out, we now need to research how the media go about setting the agenda.[3]

The Case

On the eve of 1992 there were First Night events throughout the country celebrating the New Year with various artistic happenings. In New Haven, the new Media Arts Center sought to bring attention to itself by encouraging First Nighters to send their New Year's resolutions for themselves and their country to the President. People could lean on a fence and address a life-size image of the President. The image came from a photograph of President Bush taken when he had been captain of the baseball team at Yale University, class of '48. A camcorder was ready to record the citizens as they gave their messages.

People from all walks of life including the current and former city mayors, artists, arts patrons, and others interested in a good time sent messages. The messages included requests for aid to the cities, support for the arts, health care reform, attention to the environment, changes in international trade laws, and other issues. Some were delivered in a very calm, detached manner. Others were delivered with much passion, what many would now call flame messages. One woman started calmly and found herself getting more and more frustrated with her situation

[3]John B.Webster & Robert M. Ogles, "Instrumental Agenda-Setting and Societal Obligations," Mass Comm Review, vol 15, No.1, p.40.

and used this as an opportunity to vent her anger. One performance artist delivered a prepared boxing fight in mime to vent his anger.

There were also the messages of a lighter nature. A child wished the first family's dog, Millie, a Happy New Year. Another woman pined away that if only George had met her before Barbara how happy they would have been.

The local television station reported on the activity as one of many taking place to celebrate first night. Ten days later portions of the tape had been shown on many television network news feeds, written up in papers nationwide, and served as a vehicle to bring a national news program to New Haven to interview some of the participants again.

The Question of Diversity

This case raises many issues about the current role of the media. One is the issue of diversity. With the changing media environment, are we getting a diversity of ideas? Ironically, this case presents the dilemma for the media, or the paradox in searching for diversity. As much as they are always looking for new ideas, new ways to present material, from different sources and different parts of the country, new ways to personalize a story, to give it the human interest angle, they also present the same stories. Shaw and Martin, in their review of the agenda

setting process, note that the media always go to known sources.[4] In this case the media didn't go to the known source, but rather the available one; and they all went to the same available source. Once one media outlet carried the story about the video, all possible outlets wanted a copy of the video.

It was January '92. Bush's campaign for President was a major story. Bush was deflecting criticism of his policies by going to Japan to garner favorable trade agreements for our auto industry: Any way the media could add visual elements to the story of the public criticism, they ran with it. And they all used the same visual source.

It is ironic, that as much as the media attempt to go to the wider public, they have to rely on those stories that are easiest to get.[5] Despite the plethora of channels, the plethora of news services, the system works against diversity. The public sees the same story no matter what outlet they look at or read. As pleased as the Media Arts Center was that so many outlets wanted copies of the tape, it was discouraging to consider all the other possible stories that were going untold. McQuail would characterize the performance of the media in this case as one

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[4]Donald L. Shaw & Shannon E. Martin, "The Function of Mass Media Agenda Setting," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 905.

[5] Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., Beyond Agenda-setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1981.

where external diversity was not fully met.[6]

However, this case also presents the positive goal of attempting to seek diversity, or serving as information processors rather than just the transporters as Jurgensen and Meyer describe them.[7] As much as the outlets all madly ran for the 16 minute half inch video, they also strove to edit it. Depending on their angle for their programming, they selected two or three of the most visually arresting segments. They selected the participant dressed as a grape if they were covering it as a First Night celebration, or the mime participant if their angle was more of the public's criticism of Bush's presidency.

In any case the photograph blow up of President Bush with various people spouting off their comments in front of it was seen all over the country on many different outlets. It was often the close of the news segment. On one hand the media were performing well as they were providing a way for the public to reach a consensus, by hearing what others were saying. It was also distributing or transporting one group's reactions to the rest of the country.

One news program attempted to give a fuller context to the story. The Today Show actually located a sample of the participants and gathered them together in New Haven City Hall to

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[6]Denis McQuail, Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, 1992. p.158.

[7]Karen Jurgensen and Philip Meyer, "After Journalism," Journalism Quarterly, vol.69,No.2, Summer 1992, pp.266-272.

further discuss the story. They showed a bit of the video, then went into a live interview with the selected group. Here was an example of a bit more processing.

The Ethics

The ethical issues presented by this case involve paying for stories and embargoes, and the use of private media for public consumption. First the issue of news outlets requesting the center to keep an embargo on the story until they used it was a startling confrontation with the reality of journalism. Prime Time would only have a good story if it was the first to carry portions of the video and put it into their own context. This presents two problems: 1) should the source hold back a story to gain more attention for its story; and 2) should the media outlets ask that of sources.

The argument from the viewpoint of the free and open encounter of ideas holds there was no reason for withholding the story for one, while an enterprising journalist from another outlet was interested. Whereas the other argument that the participants had serious messages which should be strategically released to the media to garner the largest audience would allow for embargoes.

There was also the concern about compensation; if the tape was being withheld from one outlet for another's use, should the center receive compensation. Prime Time considered their national prime time coverage compensation enough. Prime Time

asked for an embargo, but couldn't promise they would air it. At the same time Public Affairs Television was offering to pay the center a fee for using portions of the tape in a program in four months and did not request any embargo.

It turned out that neither outlet used the tape. Prime Time explained that the timing was wrong because the one visual they wished to use would be the mime of the fist fight with the photo; the President two days before had been seen getting sick on television. Poor taste was the reason to refrain from using the story; a commendable decision on their part. It also could have been that the embargo did not work because of an organizational miscommunication within the Media Arts Center.

Public Affairs Television (PAT) did not use the tape because its technical quality was very poor; it was shot under low light on a home type camcorder. No one questions the ethics of being reimbursed for providing content for a program, as PAT would have done. They would compensate for services without any strings. But to have a prime time news program request withholding without guarantee was a disservice to the cause of journalism, and could not be reconciled with the possibility of greater exposure. They were asking the center to take all the risk. However, if they had tempted the center with monies which were sorely needed, ethical questions would have been presented by both sides. The Center would easily be tempted to keep the story from other journalists in exchange for money.

The other ethical issue was the invasion of people's privacy

or misrepresentation to the participants. The Media Arts Center put up many signs saying the tape would be sent directly to the White House, send your message directly to the President. The Center, then decided to show the tape to a reporter. This they did with the understanding of no signed permissions needed for news items. But when the tape was requested by television outlets, the Media Arts Center decided, regardless of the legal questions, to only release those video messages from people who gave permission, after the taping. The decision was made on a moral basis and also a practical basis. Not only did the center not want to offend any of their members, they were also wary of receiving adverse publicity.

Is there a dominant medium setting the agenda?

Another aspect that was presented by this case was the question of which medium is the determinant of other media's agendas. If so many outlets carried the story, partially out of competition, and partially out of availability and newsworthiness, who was the first to use the story? Conventional wisdom or traditional understanding is that the print media are more enterprising, and the electronic media follow up on their stories. But this was a very visual story. It had a novel way of presenting a newsworthy subject, and had fighting words, a mix of people and a variety of visual elements: a photo of Bush when younger; people from all walks of life individually talking to either the photo or the camera, eating popcorn, in costumes and

one providing mime. It was a video story that could easily be initiated nationally as a story for the electronic media. The content of it was such that it would help prove Neil Postman's hypothesis that the entire media agenda is being dominated by the visual element[8], that to get the public's attention you need visuals, not necessarily an informed argument.

This case provided ammunition for all possible media as the originators as there were informed arguments presented by the mayors and other citizens; there were angry denunciations that erupted without much thought; and there were well planned artistic performances.

The initial outlet for the story was the local television evening newscast. The reporter covered the whole event of First Night and used the blow-up of the photograph with camera, etc. as the backdrop. The reporter did not base the story on the content of the messages being given to the President, but only on the possibility of everyone being able to send their message via video. There was no other media coverage and there would not have been except for another step taken by the Media Arts Center.

The Media Arts Center's staff were impressed by the content of the messages, by the seriousness with which most people took the opportunity to send a message to their President, and by the variety of issues that were being addressed. They called a freelance reporter, Jackie Fitzpatrick, who within two days

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[8]Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, N.Y., N.Y. Viking, 1985, p.16.

viewed the whole tape, interviewed the staff and some of the participants for their reaction to the event, and wrote up a story. The story was carried in the Metro Region of the Sunday New York Times and their syndicated news service on January 5, 1992.

The next day, Monday, the Media Arts Center was besieged by requests from media outlets for copies of the tape. The first outlets to request copies included: CNBC (NBC's financial cable channel), CNN, ABC's Prime Time,and Public Affairs Television. Other outlets requested copies within the week including CBS News, WABC Radio, NPR, and the four local television stations that had newscasts.

The Media Arts Center's staff encouraged more media coverage by sending releases to the local newspaper about the national media's interest in the tape. The release also announced a fund-raising event to view the tape. The local daily paper ran a front page story on January 10th. The story detailed Prime Time's decision not to carry the story due to the portrayal of Pres. Bush's recent illness caught on television and distributed throughout the world. The front page story also noted the fundraising event, and the interest of other media outlets in the story. This story was then carried on the Associated Press and more outlets requested interviews or copies of the tape.

This was a case of the media hype fulfilling its own needs, feeding on itself and almost going around in circles. The Media

Arts Center helped punctuate the transactions, so that it continued revolving. It also points out how initially a story can be carried locally; the story could end there, or a national print medium could take up the story and other national outlets will take it up. Then the local media fill in as a way to keep up with the national agenda. In the process, they again refuel the national media's need for stories.

Conclusions

For a conclusion, this case indicates on the one hand that the media continue to provide little diversity; they continue to be dominated by the national print media; they do not always act ethically. On the other hand, the case indicates the media are seeking diversity, they are attempting to be processors and put the news into a context; and they attempt to act as ethically as any of us.

This case study is representative of an increasing phenomenon; the mass media using video taken by private citizens. As Gladys Ganley has concluded "Now it is possible for many groups to effect a wide variety of different changes and to do so simultaneously. These many individuals and groups with varied ideas and goals can impact, influence, and reshape things in ways that are politically uncertain."[9]

The participants in the tape would like to think they

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[9]Gladys D. Ganley, The Exploding Political Power of Personal Media. Ablex Publishing Corp. Norwood, N.J. 1992, p.169

effected a change, but really, only the following conclusion can be drawn. People who had not had their views expressed nationwide before, now had at least their faces and, possibly, their voices heard if only for a short while. .

As the media environment continues to change, there is a critical need to research the relationships among the media. Many of our theories are based on the media environment of the past. The underlying questions about the process of how the media sets its agenda needs continuous study. Is there a shift in the relationship between national media coverage and local coverage? Does the elite print press continue to drive the electronic media, or does the relationship depend on the issue? What is the impact of personal media on mass media? The findings from such studies should help determine if the changes in the media environment mean the media provide diversity and are operating ethically. Continuous study is needed to add to our understanding of how the media sets its agenda.

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